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ABSTRACT

This report discusses efforts in adult English as a Second Language (ESL) education to link language instruction to workforce and civic skills (skills needed for successful participation in the community). It looks at the social forces that underlie these efforts (shifts in the U.S. economy, welfare reform, accountability requirements, and learner needs); describes how adult ESL educators can integrate workforce and civic life skills into their curricula (classroom simulations and cooperative learning); and discusses how to convey these skills to their students through learner-centered instructional strategies and classroom management techniques (establishing behavioral expectations, building skills through classroom rules and routines, generating learner involvement, and using teamwork to simulate the work environment). It concludes that instructional activities and classroom management techniques provide opportunities for learners to develop workforce and civic competencies and to apply what they are learning to the reality of their everyday lives. (Contains 13 references.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

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English That Works

Preparing Adult English Language Learners for Success in the Workforce and Community

Brigitte Marshall, Oakland (California) Adult Education

> *"Today in the class you said something important for me because I do it yesterday in my work. You'll said is a good idea take notes when somebody explain something to you. And that's what I did yesterday when my boss explained to me how to use the cash register. I telled her when I don't understand I'm confused to explain me again and I repeat to her what I understand to know if it's right or wrong. I asked her if sometimes can I see my notes to check if I'm doing it right. Her answer was yes because the notes can help you a lot in you work."*
>
> —Logbook excerpt by a vocational ESL student, San Diego Community College (D. Price-Machado, personal communication, April 15, 2000)

The author of this logbook entry has not learned all the grammar rules of English, but she has mastered skills that are more likely to result in success in the workforce than will a demonstration of perfect grammar. She has learned how to take notes, how to ask for clarification, and how to restate instructions.

Increasingly in the United States, adult English as a second language (ESL) instructors teach language as a means to an end: to help prepare students for success in the workforce and their communities. In the process, they must balance the needs of different stakeholders: the learners, the employers, the community, and the funding agencies.

This digest discusses efforts in adult ESL education to link language instruction to workforce and civic skills (skills needed for successful participation in the community). It looks at the social forces that underlie these efforts and describes how adult ESL educators can integrate workforce and civic life skills into their curricula and convey these skills to their students through learner-centered instructional strategies and classroom management techniques.

FL 801533

Social Forces

Behind current efforts to link language instruction to workforce and civic skills are several social forces: economic shifts, welfare reform, new accountability requirements, and a greater sensitivity among adult ESL educators to learner needs.

Economic Shifts

The United States is shifting from an economy based on industry and manufacturing to one based on services and information (Stuart, 1988). High-paying unskilled jobs are increasingly difficult to find. In today's post-industrial economy, unskilled workers "may get work, but their earnings will not keep them out of poverty and their employment future remains precarious" (D'Amico, 1997, p. 5).

A recent survey found that more than 33% of job applicants nationwide lacked the math and reading skills to do the jobs they were seeking, up from 19% in 1996 (American Management Association, 2001). The sharp increase was attributed to the higher skill levels required in today's workforce, where new technologies have raised the bar for job applicants in terms of literacy and math.

The survey confirmed a trend found by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), a group of business and education leaders convened in 1990 by the U.S. Department of Labor to determine what schools can do to better prepare students for the workforce (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). Describing successful workers as "creative and responsible problem solvers" (p. v), the commission identified the specific skills needed in today's workforce: Successful workers are able to manage resources, work with others, manage information, operate within organizational systems, and use different technologies. To perform these workforce competencies, workers need literacy and computational skills; higher order thinking skills such as decision making, problem solving, representing information, and learning to learn; and certain personal attributes, such as maturity, honesty, and sociability.

Welfare Reform

Recent welfare reform legislation has pressured welfare recipients to find work and leave public assistance. Yet many welfare recipients lack the skills needed for jobs that lead to self-sufficiency (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999). The jobs they get offer little opportunity for training and advancement. As a result, learners turn to adult education programs to provide the training that they need to advance.

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Accountability Requirements

In 1998 the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) established accountability requirements for states receiving federal funds for adult education. The National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), designed to collect information on adult education learner outcomes, became the vehicle for states reporting performance data (National Reporting System for Adult Education, 2001). NRS identifies five core outcome measures that meet the AEFLA requirements for core performance indicators: educational gain, employment, employment retention, placement in postsecondary education or training, and receipt of a secondary school diploma or GED. For *educational gain*, NRS identifies six ESL levels from beginning to high advanced. Each level is described in terms of competencies across three skill areas: speaking and listening, basic reading and writing, and functional and workforce skills.

Using the NRS descriptors as guidelines, adult ESL programs assess learners at intake. After a predetermined amount of instruction, programs assess learners again, using the level descriptors to determine progress. States have the option to use either a competency-based standardized test, such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST; Center for Applied Linguistics, 1984); the CASAS Life Skills Tests (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, 1996); or performance assessments, as long as the procedure is the same for all programs.

Learner Needs

In recent years adult ESL education has developed the tools to assess learner needs and interests. Today, curriculum developers take into account the expectations not only of employers, funding agencies, and the community but those of learners and workers as well (Burt, 1997).

In 1994 the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) launched the Equipped for the Future (EFF) initiative in response to the National Education Goals Panel challenge for a literate nation by 2000 (National Education Goals Panel, 1993). EFF asked from the perspective of adult learners, "What is it that adults need to know and be able to do in the 21st century?" SCANS had asked from the perspective of employers, "What does work require of schools?" The answers were similar, indicating enough overlap between the two for programs to develop curricula that reflect the needs of both the worker and the workforce. From the responses to the EFF question, NIFL identified 16 core skills organized in four major areas: communication, decision-making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning (National Institute for Literacy, 2000). For a comparison of the EFF Standards and the SCANS Competencies, see insert.

Developing Workforce and Civic Competencies

The SCANS competencies and the EFF standards combine basic communication, interpersonal, and thinking skills (such as problem solving, making inferences, and predicting outcomes) that form a part of any good adult education curriculum. Often a competency is embedded in the existing curriculum of an adult ESL program. It simply needs to be emphasized and its relevance to the workforce or the community made explicit.

The adult ESL classroom is a natural place to develop workforce and civic skills. This happens when instructors view learners the way that today's workforce increasingly views successful workers—as active, creative, and self-directed problem solvers who can work effectively on their own and with others.

The following ESL methods and techniques can be used to develop workforce and civic skills.

Classroom Simulations

The SCANS and EFF workforce and civic skills do not define content knowledge (what people know) but rather process knowledge (what people do and how they do it). The most direct way for instructors to help learners develop these skills is to create a learning environment that simulates the situations in which these skills are used in the outside world. For example, if talking and reading about foods is a topic of interest to learners, the instructor can teach the necessary language (e.g., food-related vocabulary, comparative and superlative statements, and language functions for expressing preferences) within the real-life context of making a budget and comparing prices of food items at different supermarkets in order to plan a reception.

In the process, learners practice a variety of workforce and civic skills. When they determine what their budget will cover, learners are making decisions and allocating resources. When they compare food prices at different stores, they are acquiring and organizing information and using math to calculate. When they select and reserve a location for the reception and develop a timetable for setup and cleanup, learners are developing an organized approach, evaluating alternatives, and anticipating problems. Throughout the process, they are working as part of a team.

Cooperative Learning

In cooperative learning, small groups of learners work together to accomplish a task, with each member playing a role needed to complete the task. As learners interact, they seek and offer input, advocate and influence, negotiate, and teach one another—all valuable civic and workforce skills and all part of SCANS and EFF frameworks.

Jigsaw activities provide practice for cooperative learning skills by requiring students to learn new information and teach it to others.

Jigsaw Activity

1. Learners form "home" teams of four members each.
2. In their home teams, learners number off one through four. Learners with the same number form "expert" teams.
3. Each expert team studies a specified segment of information.
4. Home teams come together again. Learners teach each other the segment of information they have learned in their expert teams or contribute their knowledge to complete a team project.

Project assignments allow students to learn independently and with others as they research, organize and interpret information, and communicate their findings. Students can use technology (e.g., the Internet and videos) to research and present their projects, thereby developing information management and technology competencies.

Information gathering and reporting activities, such as surveys, also promote independent learning and effective interaction skills in the classroom. For example, a simple survey idea is "Who are you and where are you from?"

Survey Activity

1. Learners interview their classmates to learn names, the spelling of names, countries of origin, and the spelling of the country names.
2. Learners record the information in a table: last name, first name, and country of origin.
3. Learners tally the figures, listing the countries represented and the number of learners from each country.
4. Learners create a graph, such as a bar graph or pie chart, to present the information in the tally.

Conveying Workforce and Civic Skills Through Classroom Management Techniques

Standards of expected behavior exist within every society, both in the workforce and in everyday interactions with individuals in the community. Through classroom management techniques, instructors can create an environment for English language learners that prepares them for the behaviors that will help them achieve success in the workforce and the community.

Establishing Behavioral Expectations

In the United States, employees are expected to be on time, to be accountable for their actions, and to show initiative. Individual responsibility, integrity, and self-management are also fundamental to success.

These expected behaviors reflect the culture of the United States and may or may not coincide with attitudes, values, and behaviors that learners bring with them from their countries of origin. Discussing cultural differences helps learners understand and develop the patterns of behavior and interaction skills expected of them in their new communities. Another benefit of understanding cultural differences is that in this country's increasingly diverse society, people need to work well with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Price-Machado, 1996).

The basic requirement for effective classroom management is for instructors to model the expected behavior. The instructor arrives on time and comes prepared with an organized instructional plan that is communicated to learners. An effective way to do this is to start each class session with an agenda that can be referred to at various times throughout the session. This draws students' attention to organization and class structure, invites them to reflect on what has been achieved within an allocated time period, and keeps them aware that they are functioning within a system.

Building Skills Through Classroom Rules and Routines

Classroom routines provide a context in which organizational skills, self-management, appropriate attitude, and personal responsibility can be modeled and practiced. Rules and routines enable learners to be systematic as they learn and operate effectively within social, professional, and technological systems. Procedures and rules can be documented and displayed in the classroom, and learners can be asked to accept responsibility for informing new students about the procedures and rules.

Instructors can create systems in the classroom that set expectations for personal organization, preparedness, and responsibility, and also provide opportunities for learners to document that they are meeting those expectations. For example, learners can maintain weekly checklists to keep track of what they need to bring to class and tasks they need to complete in class. Those with school-age children can compare their own charts and checklists with the ones their children bring home from school. In this way, parents can help their children learn as they themselves are learning.

Generating Learner Involvement

The foremost goal of classroom management techniques should be student responsibility. Involving learners in the establishment of class rules and procedures helps develop student responsibility as well as the student support that is critical to the success of classroom management techniques. Simple strategies can give learners control over how

a classroom functions and can encourage them to make decisions collaboratively, solve problems, think creatively, and exercise responsibility. Suggestion boxes provide opportunities for student input on issues from interpersonal conflicts in the classroom to furniture layout. Instructors and learners together can develop a list of classroom jobs and a job-assignment rotation.

Using Teamwork to Simulate the Work Environment

Another way to simulate the work environment is to create teams to perform classroom maintenance tasks, such as erasing the board, turning off the computers, and training new students. Teams provide a real-life context for learners to practice workforce and civic competencies. Each team role has duties and responsibilities attached to it, with clear performance criteria established in advance. Job descriptions can be posted in the classroom or printed on cards and distributed to team members as jobs are assigned. In open-entry classes, where there are frequent arrivals and departures, learners can experience a typical workforce situation where team members train new employees or fill in for absentees.

Criteria for grouping learners into teams will vary depending on the makeup of the class and the priorities of the teacher. Instructors may group learners on the basis of mixed language backgrounds, ability levels, or gender, or learners may form their own groups. No matter how the groups are formed, interpersonal challenges will exist within them, just as they exist in a workforce team. Managing these conflicts helps build interpersonal skills.

Conclusion

Instructional activities and classroom management techniques provide opportunities for learners to develop workforce and civic competencies and to apply what they are learning to the reality of their everyday lives. A successful program produces outcomes that are responsive to the goals of all stakeholders, and in doing so, prepares students for success in the workforce and in the wider community.

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EFF Standards and SCANS Competencies

EFF Standards	SCANS Competencies
Communication Skills	
Reading – Determine purpose, select strategies, monitor comprehension, analyze and integrate information	*Basic Skills* – Read, write, do math, listen, speak, interpret, organize information and ideas
Writing – Determine purpose, organize and present information, use language correctly and appropriately, revise	*Thinking Skills* – Think creatively, make decisions, solve problems, visualize, know how to learn and reason
Speaking – Determine purpose, organize information, use language correctly and appropriately, monitor effectiveness	*Personal Qualities* – Responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, honesty
Listening – Attend, use appropriate strategies, monitor comprehension, integrate new information with prior knowledge	
Observing – Attend, use appropriate strategies, monitor comprehension, analyze and integrate information	
Decision-Making Skills	
Math – Understand and work with symbolic information, apply math to solve problems, select data, use symbols to communicate	*Resource Management* – Identify, organize, plan, and allocate time, money, materials, staff
Problems and Decisions – Anticipate problems, understand causes, identify and evaluate solutions, establish criteria for solution selection	
Planning – Set and prioritize goals, develop organized approach, carry out and monitor plan, evaluate effectiveness	
Interpersonal Skills	
Cooperate – Interact courteously and respectfully, seek and give input, adjust actions to others' needs and group goals	*Interpersonal Skills* – Work on teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, work in culturally diverse settings
Advocate and Influence – Define goals, gather supporting information, make a case, revise	*Information Management* – Acquire and evaluate facts, organize and maintain data, interpret and communicate information, use computers
Conflict Resolution – Identify areas of agreement/disagreement, generate win/win options, engage parties in negotiation, evaluate and revise approach	
Guide Others – Assess others' needs and own ability, use appropriate strategies, build on others' strengths	
Lifelong Learning Skills	
Responsibility – Establish goals, identify own strengths/weaknesses, employ range of strategies, monitor progress, test in real life	*Systems* – Understand social, organizational, and technological systems, monitor and correct performance, improve/design systems
Reflect and Evaluate – Assess extent and relevance of current knowledge, make inferences, predictions, judgments	*Technology* – Select appropriate technology, apply technology to tasks, maintain and troubleshoot equipment
Research – Pose questions, use multiple lines of inquiry, organize/analyze findings	
Technology – Use electronic tools to acquire, process, and manage information and practice skills	

From *EFF Content Standards for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning*, by National Institute for Literacy, 2000, Washington, DC: Author. Available: http://www.nifl.gov/lincs/collections/eff/standards/eff_standards_text.html

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